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A Leadership Test Like Few Others

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Case Studies

The following information was extracted from an information sheet distributed to civilian teachers and counselors who volunteered at the brig circa late 1960s.

U.S. penology has undergone many changes in methods and techniques through the years. The present-day phase with rehabilitation as the major goal was first started in civilian prisons in 1925. Not until 34 years later (1959) did the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps adopt this method.

The figures on manpower lost due to confinement are staggering. As an example, on June 1965, there were 498 Navy and Marine Corps prisoners confined at the U.S. Disciplinary Command at Portsmouth, NH; 17 in federal institutions; and 1,812 Sailors and Marines in brigs. As of this date, there is a total of 3,276 men locked up.

In the interest of reducing these figures, all Navy and Marine Corps brigs, as well as the Navy's prison (Portsmouth), have correctional counselors assigned to the staffs.

(NOTE: called "the castle" by many, the Navy's prison was used from 1908 to 1974 and it is actually located in Kittery, Maine on the grounds of the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard.). Four counselors are assigned to the NTC, Great Lakes, IL brig. The counselors are either Chief Petty Officers or Petty Officers First Class with a background of interviewing and counseling. They are graduates of a four-week Correctional Counselor School, which covers such items as: Correctional History, Brig Counselor Duties, Counseling Techniques, Marine and Navy Clemency, two weeks of Psychology, and Alcoholism. Each confinee at the brig is assigned a counselor and is seen within two working days after confinement.

Civilian counselors are desired to bolster the work of the Navy counselors. Many confinees see the Navy's brig counselors as career Navy men and believe they are more interested in the Navy's welfare than their own. Also, some confinees will divulge more factual information to a civilian counselor. An educational program has also been introduced in the brig where teachers from local schools conduct classes each week in mathematics, history and English.

A Leadership Test Like Few Others

— by Ritch K. Eich

The year is 1968 – two years after I enlisted in the United States Navy as a reservist – and the place is a man-made island built in the '30s in San Francisco Bay for the Golden State International Exposition: Naval Station Treasure Island. I was berthed temporarily at Treasure Island, awaiting orders and assuming I was about to get shipped off to Vietnam. Instead, and much to my surprise, I was sent to the brig where I learned invaluable lessons in leadership.

My orders for the next two years called for me to serve as a correctional counselor at the Naval Training Center, Great Lakes, in Illinois. I saw a foreign and inequitable world that was about to face a massive and long overdue transformation, one that put Navy leaders – as well as me – to the test.

Historically, the Navy was a rigid, rules-bound bureaucracy led by a predominantly white officer corps. There were huge class divisions; and deeply entrenched institutional racism and sexism were the norms. And, the conventional wisdom was that there were severe limits to what junior enlisted sailors could accomplish.

The Navy in the 1960s and 1970s, much like society as a whole in the United States, was simmering with racial tension and dissatisfaction. Enlistments and re-enlistments in the Navy were plummeting. Protests, war, and death dominated the news. The military was unpopular. Minorities and women in particular

lacked opportunities for advancement in the Navy, leading up to, in part, the 1970 race riot at the Great Lakes brig where I was stationed.

The Brig

This was a time when U.S. involvement in Indochina had begun to grow. Our involvement in the region initially began small around the mid-1950s and escalated when President Johnson sent 3,500 U.S. Marines to Vietnam for the first time in 1965. Our troop presence in the country peaked to roughly 536,000 in 1968.

Treasure Island from Berkeley, California side

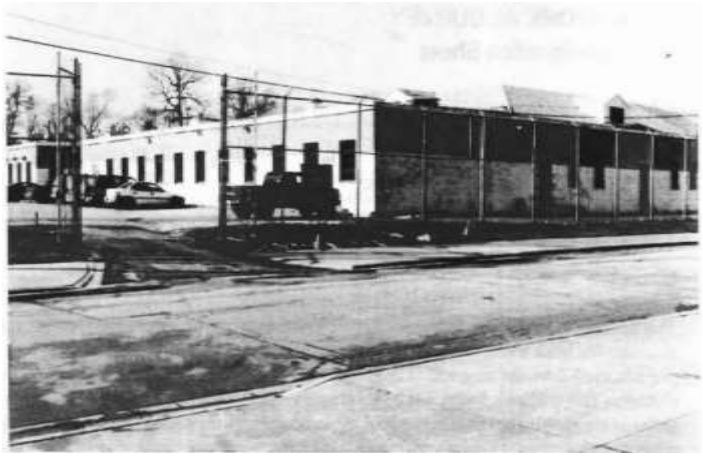
At the time, Naval Station Treasure Island was a bustling place with many sailors reporting in and many others departing with orders in hand. For the most part, those of us who were there in a transient status awaiting orders to ship out were kept busy working around the base. I recall listening repeatedly to Otis Redding's 1967 hit, "Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay," a song whose lyrics seemed to fit my life to a T.

Early one morning after breakfast, I was ordered to report to the island's correctional center, better known as "the brig." My heart pounded and I could not imagine what possible offense I'd committed. When I arrived, the commanding officer of the Treasure Island brig informed me that the Department of the Navy was concerned about the increasing loss of manpower as rising numbers of young sailors were being incarcerated, many committing offenses in boot camp or at their

U.S. Naval Station, Treasure Island

first duty station. Repeat offenses were also becoming too common despite efforts by the Navy's justice system to rehabilitate the offenders, and the Navy was seeking new, innovative ways to get sailors back on active duty. My experience and advanced college education – I had a master's degree in personnel administration – were given as the reasons for my being considered for the billet as a Navy correctional center counselor, if I was interested. After my initial shock wore off, I told the brig officer that I had prepared physically and mentally for assignment to a patrol boat in the Naval Forces Vietnam ("brown water navy"), but would serve wherever the Navy directed me to go. Several days later, my orders arrived directing me not to go to Vietnam but to report to the correctional center at Naval Training Center, Great Lakes, Illinois.

Brig, Naval Training Center, Great Lakes, Illinois



When I arrived, I was shocked by the conditions. The brig's facilities were antiquated and like many buildings of that era contained large amounts of asbestos and lead paint. The brig had been built in 1942 during WWII and had a maximum-security cellblock added in 1952 plus another wing added in 1953. There was no space for prisoner arraignment and legal counsel as JAG offices were on the main side of the base. The Navy's role in the brig at the time was largely educational and motivational. Prisoners could take classes leading to a GED (high school degree), attend religious services and see a counselor. A retired local Navy captain would periodically visit with interested prisoners to offer advice on patriotism and service to one's country.

I thought it problematic that the U.S. Marine Corps was in charge of guard duty and discipline at the brig, as was the case for confinement facilities throughout the Navy until 1976. Two Marine officers and a senior enlisted Marine – a warden – oversaw the brig. The brig officer was a major who was later promoted to lieutenant colonel and the assistant brig officer was a captain. Enlisted Marines, many of whom had been awarded Purple Hearts for combat wounds sustained in Vietnam, maintained close supervision of the prisoners. Many of the sentries were in Casualty Company and hence after completion of their day's brig duty would report to the Naval Hospital on base for medical treatment or physical or occupational therapy. It became clear to me that using decorated Marines to guard prisoners was less than ideal for a whole host of reasons. Understandably, some had little empathy for the prisoners, some of whom were awaiting court-martial or transfer to the Naval Disciplinary Command in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

Some prisoners were confined for relatively minor first offenses such as an unauthorized absence, or disobeying a direct order like refusing to jump in the pool after failing to satisfactorily complete the swimming test the first time (they were afraid of the water.) Many other prisoners had committed multiple and more serious offenses. It was clear that myriad prisoners did not want to be in the Navy to begin with – there were a number of sailors incarcerated in the brig who enlisted after being given two options by a civilian judge: join the Navy or go to jail. Not surprisingly, this practice did not inspire honorable service or bring in willing sailors. The African-American prisoners felt increasingly alienated and angry due to institutional racial discrimination at every rank.

Regrettably, during my two-year stint, there were instances of prisoner abuse. Some Marines lost a stripe or more due to misconduct. We had prison breaks, hunger strikes, and at times, overcrowding. Racial strife came to a head in a race riot on Feb. 8-9, 1970 in the brig, when black and white inmates attacked each other and had to be separated. Several prisoners required medical treatment. Given the conditions described above, the riot was inevitable.

Admiral Elmo Zumwalt: The Navy Reformer

Along came Admiral Elmo Russell Zumwalt, Jr., 49, who President Richard Nixon nominated as the Chief of Naval Operations; a transformative figure who was the youngest person ever named to that top position. Things began to change immediately. When he took office in 1970, Zumwalt led the Navy's long journey to equality. He empowered enlisted people, believed in them, and encouraged the "old salts" to stand up for their rights. Many of the Navy's regulations were archaic and parochial, with several policies going back to Colonial times. Zumwalt, an iconoclast, brought Navy customs and traditions into modern times with creative, strong but controversial leadership.

A veteran of World War II, Korea and Vietnam, Zumwalt (1920-2000) was disciplined, bold, innovative, caring, and is understandably perhaps best remembered for his crusading efforts to reduce racism and sexism in the Navy. Too seldom recognized today, however, were his efforts to retire many old, worn out warships and thus free up monies to be used more strategically for newer, more lethal ones; to enhance the capability, professionalism and reputation of the surface warfare community; to minimize if not blunt intramural service rivalries; and to address the growing Soviet threat. He was the right person at the right time.

Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr. greeting sailors

Zumwalt attacked the organizational deficiencies of the Navy from the ground up. He treated the lowest-ranking sailors with

dignity and respect. He made people want to re-enlist. Through his progressive directives, known as "Z-grams," Zumwalt tried to humanize the Navy and improve everyday living conditions for minorities, Navy spouses, female sailors and junior officers. He issued directives to establish ROTC programs at predominantly black colleges, change regulations at the U.S. Naval Academy to boost enrollment of African Americans and women, permit women to serve aboard ships at sea, and end sexist and racist policies. He created a Minority Affairs Office and loosened up the dress code. He allowed women to become Naval aviators. In 1970, Zumwalt issued what he believed was his most important directive: "Equal Opportunity in the Navy."

Zumwalt faced considerable pushback from some Navy leaders, white sailors of all ranks, the media and Washington pundits. He battled jealousy from other military leaders and Navy chief petty officers – the indispensable careerists that run things – who resisted his reform efforts. But he stood his ground. In awarding Zumwalt the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1998, President Bill Clinton called him, "One of the greatest models of integrity and leadership and genuine humanity our nation has ever produced."

Lessons from the Brig

As I reflect back 50+ years, I remember feeling fortunate at the time to have read many articles and books in college on topics that helped me when I worked in the brig: organizational theory and behavior, semantics, corporate culture, leadership, social psychology, motivation, management, counseling, negotiation, communication and personnel. In time, names like Rensis Likert, Peter Drucker, Douglas McGregor, Carl Rogers, B.F. Skinner, Warren Bennis, Abraham Maslow, S. I. Hayakawa, Max Weber, David Berlo, Edgar Schein and Victor Vroom were among those that were important.

Zumwalt with sailors

I drew many lessons from my brig experience that I have tried to apply and improve upon since 1968. The following have stood the test of time:

1. Always strive to maintain your personal set of values and principles that you wish to live by. They will guide you as you are challenged countless times in life.
2. When you sense or see a serious wrong being committed, speak up. Gather the facts or evidence, develop possible actions that may solve the problem, and take them to your supervisor. Calmly try to enlist his or her cooperation by clearly stating the problem. Offer potential solutions and seek their recommended approach.
3. Invest in training. Setting clear expectations for the Marine guards, then training to those standards, may well have headed off some of the prisoner discontent experienced in the brig.

4. Develop professional relationships with people in other departments or divisions. Learn their needs, goals, and frustrations. Discern what joint strategies might be developed to improve recurring problems that affect the command.
5. Respect others' rank or status (military or civilian) and pay appropriate deference to them, but never cower, as it will lessen your influence.
6. Remember that there is strength in numbers, so try to enlist staunch supporters who will back your ideas.

The Big Picture

Finally, my experience with the brig reminds me that regardless of your position, assignment or job, and whether or not you land where you want in your career, you should strive to make meaningful contributions and do your absolute best. As the age-old adage says, "sprout where you are planted." I had made a conscious decision to join the Navy in 1966 as an enlisted man, not as an officer, and it wasn't until a year after I'd completed active duty that I received a commission as an officer. Nearly 30 years later, I retired as a captain.

I firmly believe my experience as an enlisted man helped me become a better officer. Having "walked in their shoes," I felt I had a keener understanding of how to relate to enlisted sailors, how to listen to them, motivate them, and challenge them. Enlisted personnel learn accountability, punctuality, how to work under intense pressure with sometimes limited resources, trouble-shooting, problem-solving, getting along with others in close quarters and how to appreciate other cultures, ethnicities, genders, lifestyles, and religions. Drucker's admonition was correct: leaders must "teach" and he didn't mean in the classroom per se, but in many different ways.

My "job" in the military was to serve where the Navy felt I was needed most. If it was in the brig and not in Vietnam, so be it. I had never previously worked in any kind of penal environment nor had any particular interest in doing so, but I'd already decided that I would serve where ordered. I tried to help offenders turn their lives around and become productive citizens whether they returned to active duty or were awaiting discharge.

Remember: "If your ship does not come in … swim out and meet it." — Author unknown

We must learn to accept change and commit to do our best. I faced a new and tough challenge by being placed in a military prison overseen by patriotic, decorated, combat-proven Marines who deserved much better after Vietnam. I started out in the brig with little credibility given my junior enlisted rank, wearing civilian clothes, and having no formal training. But I decided I'd give 100 percent, listen, and learn from my coworkers who were more experienced, and do my best. I vowed to give 100 percent before I joined the Navy, in part, due to my appreciation for the selflessness and bravery of the Sullivan brothers in WWII, in tribute to my father who worked in a Navy shipyard during the war, and in admiration of my courageous childhood hero, Jackie Robinson.

Fortunately, the Navy today is a much different service, one where women and people from all ethnic backgrounds can, and do, excel and have opportunities they were previously denied for a great career. The Navy has performed excellent work over the years to address

many of the shortcomings in its treatment of minorities and women. Thanks to the sacrifice of countless service members, veterans and courageous leaders like Admiral Zumwalt, the Navy – and all us – are better off today. And, without question, the Marines always had my back!

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